Finding the Straight Path

I was born about 3 weeks early on Nov. 29th 1947. Many people do not know that this was a day that would send reverberations around the world. Not because of my birth but because of a crucial United Nations vote which took place on that day. On that day the United Nations voted for the partition of Palestine into Palestinian and Jewish states. Even though I was much too young to realize it, I had my first introduction to Islam.

To my knowledge there has never been a Muslim in my family. However, my DNA testing shows that my ancestors did pass through Islamic lands so some of my ancestors undoubtedly were believers in the primordial religion of Adam, Noah and Abraham. I do not know if anyone was a follower of The Prophet as I have never had my family tree traced. I suppose someone from my father's family could have been since he was from Eastern Europe and that area has had some Muslim influence.

I was raised as a Roman Catholic by my parents. My mother had converted before marrying my father. She came from a line of very conservative Protestants many of whom were educated at Moody Bible Institute. There were several women preachers in my family also. There also were some Jewish people in her family and my mother explained some of the Judaic laws to me. Consequently I have always been interested in Judaism although I never thought of converting.

I have always been very interested in the cultures of others. I find it especially interesting to study the religious beliefs and practices of others. The similarities of so many practices and beliefs have convinced me that there was a primordial belief which has been forgotten and changed through time. I also find it fascinating to see how cuisines of cultures comingle and travel from place to place. For example, women in Iran and Puerto Rico use the same method to measure the correct amount of water to put on their rice. I am sure this method was conveyed to each culture via Islamic cooks!

I went to Catholic school until my 2nd year in high school. I had considered becoming a religious but decided I did not want so much control in my life. I did not realize at the time how important the guidance of God was in a person's life. I attended Mass faithfully and received the sacraments in due course.

It was at this time I first learned about Islam. I started to study Spanish in high school. As you know the Iberian Peninsula was greatly influenced by the Islamic culture. One cannot understand the history of Spain without learning something of Islam. The language, cuisine, music, culture and decorative arts were all influenced by Islam. This is especially true of Andalucía in Southern Spain. Even its name comes from the Arabic, Al Andaluz.

Several films of this time period whetted my appetite to learn more. El Cid with Charleton Heston and Sophia Loren portrays the classic Spanish epic of a battle for Spanish territory between the Moors (as they were called) and the Christian forces. I would eventually read the poem in one of my more advanced

Spanish classes. David Lean's Lawrence of Arabia captured my imagination. It took place during WWI and portrayed the struggle of the Arabs against the Ottoman Turks. Lt. T.E. Lawrence was sent by the British to aid the Arab tribes in their fight. I remember reading the Seven Pillars of Wisdom by Lawrence. That in itself was quite a struggle. I wonder now where I would have gotten that book as I lived in the country in a very small town in Indiana. My mother was always taking classes at Valparaiso University so I am guessing we must have purchased it at the bookstore there. There were no online bookstores back then! I also had a book on Islamic Arts. My mother wanted me to have a well rounded education so we often visited my father's family in Chicago and would go to the museums there. I enjoyed seeing the art from other countries and eras.

Sadly to say, by the time I started college I quit practicing my faith. It was not that I disbelieved, I just shoved God to the furthest corner of my mind. Even through many struggles in my first marriage, I was not going to church. I said private prayers and I read about many different faiths. I even learned astrology so as to be able to cast horoscopes. I divorced and eventually remarried and went through some times of severe anxiety. Finally I started going back to church and had a "born again" experience. This is a special closeness to God. It brought great peace to me and reduced my anxiety. From that time on I attended church regularly.

Allah, however, had plans to draw me closer to Him or so it seemed to me when I look back. My daughter became friends with an Iranian girl in her school. I met her parents and came to know some of their culture. It was then I bought my first translation of the Holy Koran. We moved away after a year or so and for four years continued to go to church. Then after another move I met a dear friend who is married to an Iranian man. Again I learned more of the culture and how to cook some of the food. Even though she was not a Muslim she taught me about Islam and again my interest was captured. I continued with church attendance and Bible Studies. She moved away but our friendship still endures. I moved again, this time to Minnesota. I found a church, started volunteering and was happy in my beautiful home.

In 1997 I started having the feeling God had something He wanted me to do. Something specific beyond just obeying the laws of the church and the laws of our country. I felt I had to start to learn to drive places on my own so I drove to Omaha NE to work for a week. I did not want to take a 25th anniversary trip but took a 20th anniversary trip. I went to confession at Christmas time and told my priest about my feeling that I had a special mission. I think he thought I was "strange". Then in Jan 1998 my husband died of a heart attack. He was only 46. I became very close to God then and it gave me a great deal of comfort.

I spent a great deal of time searching out what I should do with myself at that time. I became very active in my church, helping with fundraising for a school and being elected to the parish council. I also volunteered at the Minnesota Zoo and watched children of friends. Through my church I met people form all over the world. I was able to visit India and have made lifelong friends both Catholic and Hindu. In India I saw people of all religions living together in harmony. I also visited Spain and was able to see the Alhambra and the Grand Mosque in Cordoba. In Toledo there is a very interesting museum

dedicated to the Islamic influences in Spain. I was amazed to see a very delicate set of dental instruments used in the 12^{th} century.

In May of 2001 I finally decided to follow a call of God and begin saying the Catholic rosary. I focused on praying for Peace in the world. For many years I felt a strong urge to work for Peace in the world. It seemed a hopeless task. I did little things such as always sending Christmas cards that mentioned peace on earth. I would buy things that said Peace on them for housewarming presents etc. I had not wanted to heed God's call in this endeavor either. With the help of friends a group of women started praying the Rosary every first Tuesday. We prayed for Peace in the World. I did not know why God wanted me to do this but on Sept. 11^{th} 2001 it became evident to all of us that there was more unrest in the world than we imagined. We were shocked that someone hated America so much that they would do such a thing. We continued praying every month and I did not stop until becoming a Muslim. Some of the prayers do not agree with the teachings of Islam. I still pray in my heart that God will change the hearts and minds of combatants all over the world.

For the next few years I continued on with my life. I read about other religions and continued with my volunteer activities. In 2003 I started to attend a series 0f lectures about Islam at the mosque in Bloomington. After the series was over I started to attend a session at one of the sister's houses but then I moved and was traveling so I stopped. I think I knew that I would become a Muslim but I just did not want to give up and change. I did by a copy of the Holy Koran translated by Yusuf Ali and I read it from cover to cover. I read biographies of Mohammad and books about Islam. When my dog died I did not get another dog but got a cat instead as I knew most Muslims thought dogs were unclean. He is a Persian cat and has a Farsi name.

By now it was 2006 and I received more and more signs from Allah. One time a friend and I were talking about the troubles in the Islamic world she said we Non-Muslims could not be the ones to bring peace to the Islamic world. We agreed it had to come about through the Muslims themselves. I knew that if I wanted to work for peace in the world I would have to become a Muslim. My carnal self did not want to change. I ignored further messages from Allah delivered by people in my bible study group. One lady kept telling all of us to submit to God's will. Isn't that what Islam is all about? Another one said choose a path and stick to it. Is not Islam the Straight Path? I had tried for years to get something to tie me closer to the Catholic Church. I applied for quite a few jobs at my parish but was not found suitable. I know that Allah blocked my being hired so that I would be free to join Islam. Still I fought God's will. I never thought I was stubborn but I am. I did not want to give up alcohol, pork or practice the discipline of daily prayers. I had many scarves and long skirts but I did not want to be compelled to cover my hair.

Finally, when I was attending college classes I decided to give up alcohol. When I was able to do that I knew I could do everything else. Even so I still feared to take the step. Finally, I prayed to Allah to send me a teacher if He wanted me to become a Muslim. Since I was studying at a Catholic University I was sure no teacher would "Be" and the thing will happen and he sent a Muslim scholar to my class in beginning Christian Theology. At that time I knew there could be no more hesitation. I made my Shahadah shortly afterwards. I know I will have to continue on in my struggle to be a good Muslim but I know with the help of Allah and my brother and sister Muslims I will keep on the straight path.